

October 16, 2020

Dear Chair Thompson and Members of the House Committee on Public Health:

Texas Medical Association appreciates the opportunity to comment on Interim Charge 3: *Review behavioral health capacity in the state, with a focus on suicide prevention efforts and the provision of behavioral health care services to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Review suicide prevention programs and initiatives across state agencies, evaluate their effectiveness, and identify opportunities for greater coordination.*

With regard to suicide prevention, our members wish to highlight the findings of the Texas Health & Human Services Commission's Report on Suicide and Suicide Prevention in Texas as required by House Bill 3980, 86th Legislature. This report, published May 2020, finds that from 2000 to 2017:¹

- Suicide mortality in Texas increased overall from 9.8 deaths per 100,000 population in 2000 to 13.3 deaths per 100,000 in 2017;
- Suicide death rates among youth and young adults aged 15-24 increased by 41.1% statewide. In 2017, nearly 18% of Texas high school students seriously considered attempting suicide;
- Suicide rates among older adults (aged 65+) remained steadily high for the entire period, and Texans aged 55-64 saw a 60.9% increase in suicide rates, the fastest growth of any age group;
- Deaths by suicide among Whites are now roughly triple the those observed in other populations of color, with increases observed over time across all race and ethnic groups; and
- Age-adjusted rates of suicide in Texas veterans are nearly double the general public;
- Males in Texas die by suicide at higher rates, though more females than males report suicidal ideation (seriously thinking about suicide); and
- Lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults in Texas report past-year suicidal ideation approximately 4-5 times more commonly than straight adults in the same age group.

These and other findings contained in the report clearly indicate a growing burden of suicidality in Texas over the past two decades. We observe a concentrated burden of suicide deaths and distress in certain populations, including school-age youth and young adults, the aging population, veterans, and the LGB community, which should be clear targets for supportive interventions going forward.

Our organization wishes to emphasize the importance of maintaining state investments in numerous suicide prevention efforts in the child welfare system, jails and correctional settings, Texas Veterans Commission, and community-based suicide prevention grants administered through the

¹ Texas Health and Human Services Commission. (May 2020). Report on Suicide and Suicide Prevention in Texas. Available at: <https://hhs.texas.gov/reports/2020/06/suicide-suicide-prevention-texas>

Texas Department of State Health Services and HHSC. The HHSC report details goals, activities, and investments associated with numerous suicide prevention programs administered by state agencies. We encourage the 87th legislature to evaluate the report's findings, and take action to ensure regional gaps or gaps in serving high-risk populations are addressed, and ensure programs receiving state resources are using evidence-based interventions and strategies to prevent suicide.

We also wish to emphasize the importance of the Texas Department of Public Safety's "Keep 'Em Safe" firearm safety campaign, passed in the 86th legislature, as an effort worth sustaining given its value in suicide prevention.² According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2,158 of Texas' 3,778 total suicide deaths in 2017 (57%) were deaths by firearm.³ Safe and secure household storage of firearms is critical in preventing access to a means of suicide with high lethal potential, especially among youth or individuals in the household under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Nationally, approximately 22% of deaths by suicide involve alcohol intoxication, and the disinhibiting effects of acute alcohol or drug intoxication are thought to significantly contribute to higher suicide rates in this population.⁴

Texas physicians recognize the tremendous loss Texas families experience when a loved one is lost to suicide. In our practices, we rely on evidence-based, coordinated crisis interventions when a patient is actively considering suicide, including referring to an emergency department or connecting with a mobile crisis outreach team. However, we wish to emphasize first and foremost that suicide is a preventable phenomenon, avoidable with strong community supports for mental health, community safety, school climate, and other upstream measures. We applaud the committee's examination of this issue and encourage the 87th legislature to dedicate its full attention to supporting a broad spectrum of community services that will reduce the burden of suicide in Texas, well before a person finds themselves in a crisis situation.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Diana L. Fite, MD". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the beginning and a long, sweeping line extending to the right.

Diana L. Fite, MD
President
Texas Medical Association

² Texas Department of Public Safety. (2019). Keep 'Em Safe Texas campaign. Available at: www.safegunstoragetexas.com

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2017). CDC WONDER Online Database, Multiple Cause of Death Files.

⁴ U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2016). Substance use and suicide: A nexus requiring a public health approach. Available at: <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma16-4935.pdf>